

# Kunapipi

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Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 10

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1987

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### Recommended Citation

Tittensor, John, Frank and Jim and Seal: An extract from Irishtown and After, *Kunapipi*, 9(2), 1987.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss2/10>

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## Frank and Jim and Seal: An extract from *Irishtown and After*

### Abstract

In the wooden house next door live the O'Reilly brothers Frank and Jim, together with Jim's wife Seal. Frank, the older, is short, rotund, shinyfaced; a devout Catholic, he has achieved, at the age of fifty or so, the distinction of having converted a Baptist friend to the True Faith. Over a cup of tea in the boy's house Harry the ex-Baptist, a darkly handsome young ambulance man, relates to a soberly sympathetic audience how his family has all but rejected him, accusing him bitterly of allowing his mind to be warped by Roman Catholic propaganda. Each of his listeners without exception wishes he or she could have been the one to bring this mild but determined soul into the Church; and each simultaneously longs to be Harry, to be in the convert's position of affirming a rock-solid faith in the face of the jibes of unbelievers. They click their tongues in muted, angry solidarity each time they hear of themselves being referred to as 'Roman' Catholics; these people are Catholics pure and simple and as they so regularly assert the term 'Catholic', since it means 'universal', cannot in all commonsense be qualified and reduced by the word 'Roman'.

## Frank and Jim and Seal

An extract from *Irishtown and After*

In the wooden house next door live the O'Reilly brothers Frank and Jim, together with Jim's wife Seal. Frank, the older, is short, rotund, shiny-faced; a devout Catholic, he has achieved, at the age of fifty or so, the distinction of having converted a Baptist friend to the True Faith. Over a cup of tea in the boy's house Harry the ex-Baptist, a darkly handsome young ambulance man, relates to a soberly sympathetic audience how his family has all but rejected him, accusing him bitterly of allowing his mind to be warped by Roman Catholic propaganda. Each of his listeners without exception wishes he or she could have been the one to bring this mild but determined soul into the Church; and each simultaneously longs to *be* Harry, to be in the convert's position of affirming a rock-solid faith in the face of the jibes of unbelievers. They click their tongues in muted, angry solidarity each time they hear of themselves being referred to as 'Roman' Catholics; these people are Catholics pure and simple and as they so regularly assert the term 'Catholic', since it means 'universal', cannot in all commonsense be qualified and reduced by the word 'Roman'.

Harry is largely unaware of the burden of symbolism he bears, of the near-mystic aura the convert rubric confers: for it bespeaks someone who has had to discover and live his knowledge of Divine Truth rather than simply be born to it, and thus calls up those heroes of Roman times — nobody ever asks if *they* were Roman Catholics — who embraced their new-found faith in full and fearless acceptance of the persecution and possible death to which they laid themselves open. Converts make the best Catholics, Sister Francis tells the class, because they have made a mature, conscious choice; the possibility of such a choice's leading anywhere but into the arms of the Catholic Church is never raised, for it goes without saying that the authentic exercise of free will can tend in no other direction.

Harry smiles a little in a wry, self-effacing way as he gives his account of the treatment meted out to him by his family: The boy laughs aloud at

the sheer bigoted ridiculousness of such a reaction, but the reproving looks of the adults silence him at once. For them Harry epitomizes the exclusion and victimization that are their lot in a fundamentally anti-Catholic society; he embodies the situation of what they call 'the Church Suffering' and if Harry himself seems less concerned than they about derision and persecution it can only be because he has not yet been one of them — 'one of our own' as they often put it — for long enough to appreciate that what they are all going through is no laughing matter.

Modest, tubby Frank O'Reilly is much respected for having guided a soul to the Church and is generally thought of as having thereby guaranteed himself a place in Heaven when the time comes. And yet he is confronted, literally on his own doorstep, with a contradiction so flagrant that the boy has no choice but to ignore it: for neither Jim nor Seal — her Christian name is Celia — ever goes to Mass at all, and so are presumably living in an entrenched state of mortal sin, with its attendant risk of eternal damnation should anything dramatically unexpected happen to them.

If anything dramatically unexpected ever happens to Jim O'Reilly it should by rights do so in the Victorian Railways shunting yards where he works. For Jim is frankly a boozer and it is not comforting to think of him making his way, in the altered state he prefers, through the clashing anarchy of the rolling stock. But he has, it seems, a charmed life. Early each morning he sets off late for the station at an enchantingly flatfooted bow-legged lope, his collapsed gladstone bag in his hand and his black, flat-crowned shunter's hat squarely and soberly on his head; to return intact in the evening but with his gait a trifle slower and looser, hat tipped back and bag clanking with bottles. He may stop briefly to discuss the weather or the football with a neighbour — doing this in tones whose raw diphthongal angularity is impressive even in Australia — but thanks to the beer he has already consumed and the bagful awaiting his attention his mind is clearly elsewhere. Reaching home he unlatches the double gate of the driveway — it is one of those houses whose front gate and front door are *never* used — and clanks down the twin strips of concrete that lead to the garage. The rear screen door moans open, slams; there comes the unmistakable sound of bottles being transferred into an ice chest; a silence intervenes during which the first beer of the evening is opened and poured and then the summons *Seal! Seal!* evokes a flat, nasal *Yeah, what?* from somewhere in the front part of the house. *Where's me tea?* Jim cries, *where's me tea?* His voice like a circular saw running across a nail. His tea — his evening meal — is coming, Seal calls back in a tone carefully calculated to reveal nothing of her feelings about her situation.

Her situation: she is, perhaps, thirty-five but manages to look indeterminately older; her face is plainness incarnate and she suffers from a shyness so paralysing that she virtually never ventures beyond the confines of the quarter-acre block she lives on. If spotted over the side fence as she hangs out the washing she retreats indoors at once, leaving the wet clothes in the galvanized iron tub until it seems safe to emerge and try again. At a time when even Protestants have relatively large families she and Jim remain childless: nobody knows why, but the folklore of the street has it that Seal, although tonally indistinguishable from normal people, is part-aboriginal and that the two of them have decided to forgo children rather than risk having a 'throwback'. Even the local Catholics, despite the repeated thunderous warnings about birth control they are subjected to, seem implicitly to accept this as a sensible course of action. However unfortunate it may be, the day of the aborigines is past: their failure to adapt has doomed them to a process of gradual extinction which cannot now be halted, least of all by Seal and Jim's bringing into the world a half-caste, a creature destined to be rejected by both black and white all its life. They are — although it is never put as explicitly as this — showing a sense of responsibility by choosing not to obstruct their country's advance towards the unquestioned ideal of racial homogeneity.

*Where's me tea, Seal?* comes once more the querulous, half-pissed demand from the kitchen — one of those quasi-afterthought skillion kitchens whose iron roof slants down from what should be the back wall of the house and whose floorboards are rotten because the bearers have been laid directly on the earth. The boy, listening from next door as Jim's demand to be fed underlines the silence of a house that in a street swarming with children has never been home to any, tries to imagine what it would be like if a throwback — whatever it is and however it is made — were to materialize there. Would it look, he wonders, like the aboriginal — the only aboriginal and the only non-white person he has ever seen — he once watched capering drunkenly and playing a gumleaf for heedless rush-hour crowds in Bourke Street? But it is the word itself that has seized him, rather than any possible actualization of it, the word 'throwback' with its intimations of a darkly hidden past, its irresistible mingling of mystery and threat. A throwback in the house next door, he ultimately decides, is worth the risk of wishing for: its presence would constitute a challenge, although to what, and of what kind, he has no idea; and even if not as desirable as a standard Australian child it might help to alleviate the stoic, animal helplessness he senses in Seal.

Apathetic Seal, now coming down the central passageway — what can there be to occupy her in the rest of the house? — to draw Jim's tea from the oven. She eats with him, then does the dishes as he drinks on. And as the evening takes its course with them sitting in the kitchen alone — Frank being out most nights doing voluntary work for the St John's Ambulance Brigade — the beer, with a dreadful regularity, induces in Jim a basic insight in respect of his marriage: while he is out risking his life in the shunting yards Seal is conducting a liaison with Frank. *Arrh, y'bloody slut!* he moans despairingly. *Rootin' me own brother! Me own flamin' brother! A man'd be a dingo not to've spotted it before now! Struth!* His voice rises and falls between accusation and angry self-reproach as the wrongs he has suffered parade themselves tauntingly. *Bloody slut!* he bursts out again and rails boozily at his wife until she says *Oh shuddup Jim* in the same dead-neutral voice as before and asks if he wants a cup of tea. If the stock of beer is exhausted he accepts the tea, then wanders out to urinate noisily in the backyard, muttering to himself about the treachery of women and the blindness of the men who marry them.

*Where's me pyjamas, Seal?* he can be heard calling from the front bedroom. *I can't find me bloody pyjamas!* Eventually, it seems, the errant pyjamas are found; the lights go out and Jim and Seal vanish into a silence that will only be breached, briefly, when Frank comes home in his black Pontiac with the Indian-chief mascot in majestic profile on the bonnet.

Frank dies one day of a heart attack without ever being made privy to his brother's suspicions. Jim inherits the house and the Pontiac, both of which are thereby embarked on an inexorable process of deterioration. He sells off the vacant block on the far side of the house to a Christian fundamentalist family who build there, neatly: the husband is modestly but determinedly successful in business, the wife and daughter wear their clothes plainly and their hair severely, and the three of them, for fear of being morally polluted, speak to nobody at all. Seal has found the perfect neighbours. Jim works on in the shunting yards and drinks the rest of the time until, after a generous period of grace, his own, preliminary attack comes along. The doctor orders him off the grog, so he cuts down to a mere six bottles — about four and a half litres — a day, thus hastening the second and decisive attack. Seal sells up, moves away without a word and is glimpsed by a neighbour one day in a distant suburb, smartly dressed, elegantly made-up and doing her shopping in perfect confidence.